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UNCLAS SAN SALVADOR 000521

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR ELECTIONS: LA PAZ AND CUSCATLAN  
DEPARTMENTS

¶1. SUMMARY: Poloff visited the cities of Zacatecoluca and Olocuilta in the La Paz Department on February 22. Two days later, Poloff visited the cities of Cojutepeque and Santa Cruz Michapa in the neighboring Cuscatlan department. Zacatecoluca and Cojutepeque are the capitals of their respective department, and each currently has an incumbent FMLN mayor. Similarly, both Olocuilta and Santa Cruz Michapa have incumbent National Conciliation Party (PCN) mayors likely to be reelected. While ARENA candidates offer future municipal infrastructure projects if elected, the FMLN has guaranteed its adherents medical treatment in Cuba. In the visited cities, ARENA clearly appeared to have better campaign financing, as evidenced in larger distribution of leaflets and billboard displays.

ARENA Poised for Victory in Zacatecoluca, La Paz

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¶2. According to a February 9 poll, ARENA candidate Medardo Alfaro holds a significant lead (31 percent) over FMLN candidate Raul Pineda. During separate February 22 meetings with poloff, Alfaro and Pineda outlined similar agendas of cleaning up the city and rebuilding infrastructure. (Note: Zacatecoluca was badly damaged during the 2001 earthquakes, and little infrastructure has been rebuilt to date. End note.) The incumbent FMLN mayor, Italo Lievano, razed the city's three earthquake-damaged municipal markets, sending vendors into the streets where they still remain. Streets are now nearly impassable due to lack of maintenance and trash collection. Poloff also spoke with Zacatecoluca residents and ARENA members Ely Salamanca and Jose Vizcarra, who hope that a win by Alfaro would entail increased cooperation and funding from the (ARENA) federal government. Salamanca and Vizcarra nonetheless complained that ARENA had been ineffective in informing the local community of candidates other than Alfaro.

¶3. On poloff's later visit to La Paz Department's smaller city of Olocuilta, PCN Mayor Antonio Funes claimed to have made many improvements during his time in office, and outlined several goals. He states that he enlisted international donors to fund the construction of the "City of Education," a center where local teens could receive technical training. He claims that although the federal government originally committed to fund enough teachers, they have not actually done so, and the municipality has been paying the salaries of 17 teachers. Because of this funding issue, Funes admitted that they are charging student fees to defray expenses. (Note: It is illegal for public schools in El Salvador to charge fees. End Note.)

¶4. COMMENT: Although there seems to be consensus that Zacatecoluca needs a major revitalization, neither candidate appears likely to accomplish this goal. A Millennium Challenge Account project is proposed for northern El Salvador, but there is at present little GOES or international development funding for projects in La Paz,

notwithstanding the candidates' "wish lists" for heavy construction equipment, foreign assistance, and bank loans.  
END COMMENT.

Cuscatlan: Corruption and Castro

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15. While waiting February 24 to meet with FMLN Mayor Leticia Cristina Rivas in Cojutepeque (Cuscatlan Department), poloff overheard the mayor's secretary phoning local residents about a Cuban-funded medical program. When asked about the program, Rivas explained that the Cuban and Venezuelan governments planned to fund the travel and ophthalmologic surgery of 24 residents in each FMLN-controlled municipality in El Salvador prior to the March 12 elections.

Early-February CID-Gallup polling for Cojutepeque indicates that Rivas is in first place with 26 percent support among intending voters, compared to ARENA candidate Guadalupe Serrano's 18 percent. However, with 47 percent of the population still undecided, the election could go either way.

ARENA members in Cuscatlan complained to poloff that FMLN members had attacked them and torn down ARENA posters; such tactics on the part of both parties are not uncommon during campaign season in El Salvador.

16. Poloff afterwards spoke with Santa Cruz Michapa's PCN Mayor Jose Salvador Vanegas, a former bus line owner who reported that he had sold his business due to its unprofitability. When poloff asked Vanegas about a gift-wrapped box on his desk, he responded that local residents liked to give him presents to thank him for his hard work.

17. COMMENT: Mayor Rivas was quite the consummate politician, with well-rehearsed answers and the ability to deflect difficult questions and switch to subjects she preferred. On the other hand, Mayor Vanegas seems destined to remain a small-town mayor, with little prospect of higher political office.

Barclay